

The concrete floor? He finished it. The recycled-pipe “wainscot” along the counter and walls? He made it. When Tim Turner opened Zia Taqueria on Cinco de Mayo, 2005, he knew exactly what he wanted.

“We try to promote what we believe in: treat the earth kindly, tread lightly, stay healthy and offer good food at reasonable prices,” says Turner. By those measures, Zia Taqueria is a mission accomplished.

The overall look is industrial-chic, and the building boasts numerous green initiatives. Turner and his wife, Rebecca—a silversmith by trade and managing partner in the business—both bike to work as much as possible. Anything they can recycle, they cart to the nearest facility on foot. And in terms of fundraising, food donations and monetary contributions, they support more than 100 local organizations and have yet to say no.

Turner has been the successful proprietor of bakeries and even an olive oil company, but Zia is his first restaurant venture as primary owner. From a former bakery, he tapped a pastry chef known for her Mexican feasts to help develop Zia’s menu. They traveled with another employee to San Francisco to sample the best taquerias around and “benchmark” their new menu.

Turner modeled Zia’s original offerings after popular sub and burrito chains, where customers can see and choose fresh ingredients down the line. He noticed that while the visual array excited some, others were overwhelmed. “Our original goal was to offer people what they wanted. But we found that some people didn’t want to make choices,” he says.

The selection that greets patrons is indeed expansive, starting with three beans and continuing with two types of rice, seven meats and veggies, cheeses, and six salsas. For those who would rather not “micromanage” their meal, Turner has added daily features such as chile rellenos and tamales. Each entrée special is served complete with a side salad or rice and beans—no additional thought required.

Turner recently spotted a business partnership on the south side of town that he couldn’t resist. Ska Brewing is a quirky, local-minded company that had recently moved into a state-of-the-art brewery. They expanded the space to include a large tasting room with a band stage and beer garden—but still offered no food. Now at the brewery, Zia operates out of a 1965 Airstream trailer with a hip industrial look to match the home-base restaurant’s. Customers order and eat in Ska’s tasting room, and Zia also has first dibs on catering opportunities. Together, the two businesses sponsor community events and give back as much as possible to their customers.

Local, fresh ingredients remain the menu’s foundation at Zia. An increasing amount of veggies and meat comes from one of the organizations they support—the educational farms at La Boca Center for Sustainability. Organic beans are purchased from a nearby producer. The restaurant even buys a hog at the 4-H Club’s annual auction and has it processed at a nearby USDA-approved facility.

Despite the higher cost of such product sourcing, Turner decided not to raise menu prices. It was a way to help Zia stand out from the competition—and keep the company commitment to reasonable prices. To compensate, Turner makes sure to streamline a major expense at any operation: labor. And what better way than keeping employees happy? “We believe in treating employees well, paying them a fair wage, and providing a clean, well-lit work environment that’s friendly. A benefit of that is we don’t have to pay to re-train on a routine basis.”

Employee incentives are creative and thoughtful. In exchange for donating Zia's scraps to a local ranch for chicker feed, staff members get to take home fresh eggs. Turner also purchases bikes for employees who are willing to commute using their own locomotion.

Treating employees well has obvious effects on patron loyalty, too, and Turner has also observed that repeat guests are the most efficient customers. "Things go so much more smoothly when people are familiar with the program," he says. During the lunch rush, guests who know how and what to order—and servers who can guess their selection ahead of time—move the line along quickly. Since even a 10-minute wait can discourage those who need to get back to work, every minute counts.

Turner notes that his commitment to Shamrock and local foods go hand in hand. "It's a balance. We'll always use Shamrock Foods, and we'll always try to buy locally when we can." Not only did rep Rich Olsen ensure Shamrock was Zia's No. 1 distributor, but his creative sourcing for quality products has given Turner the margin he needs to purchase more expensive, local ingredients.

As with every partnership, Turner looks for a match in underlying philosophy. "I like the fact that Shamrock has grown from a family dairy. Most everyone I've worked with is hard working, honest, and committed to making a difference."

Walk into Zia Taqueria, taste the Super Taco and see the employees' smiles—and you'll know you've found something genuine. And for that, Turner is truly happy.

"To have a restaurant that serves really fresh food that I love, to be able to improve the quality of life of employees, to put money and energy back into our community...I don't know if there's anything else that I'd want. Every day, that feeling of being fortunate encourages me to give more."

Zia Taqueria Open seven days a week, 11 a.m.–8 p.m. 3101 Main Avenue Durango, Colorado (970) 247-3355  
[www.ziataqueria.com](http://www.ziataqueria.com)